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SUBJECT: SAUDIS CONTINUE DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL PUSH
FOR TOLERANCE AND DIALOGUE

REF: A. RIYADH 1780
[1](#)B. RIYADH 1170
[1](#)C. RIYADH 1270
[1](#)D. MADRID 799
[1](#)E. RIYADH 1035

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (U) As part its "War of Ideas" campaign to combat extremism and in the context of its overall reform programs, the SAG continued its campaign to promote national dialogue and tolerance through a 3-day forum for cultural dialogue trainers. In a keynote address, Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti called for "acceptance of other viewpoints." Government ministers and religious figures echoed the Grand Mufti's message aimed at shaping public opinion away from extremism. Additionally, the King launched a program to encourage dialogue between foreign and Saudi students. Meanwhile, a Saudi delegation promoted the King's Interfaith Dialogue Initiative (IDI) at an ecumenical conference in Kazakhstan. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) The King launched a 3-day, ten-session forum July 4 at the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue (KACND) for trainers certified in the promotion of cultural dialogue. The forum provided high-level public reinforcement of the King's national dialogue agenda to promote tolerance of diverse opinions, and a culture of dialogue and moderation in Saudi Arabia to curb extremism. The forum also sought to use new means of communication between KACND and different segments of society. According to KACND Secretary General Faisal bin Abdulrahman bin Mu'ammam, the Center's 1,200 plus certified trainers have conducted 2,677 training programs and workshops on "the culture and importance of open dialogue and communication skills," for over 150,000 men and women. Mu'ammam also noted that an equal number of men and women participated in the July forum.

INFLUENTIAL LEADERS PROMOTE DIALOGUE,
TOLERANCE, VIGOROUS SOCIAL DEBATE

[1](#)3. (U) In a speech entitled "The Islamic Principles of Dialogue," Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Asheikh, called for "cooperation and acceptance of other viewpoints if society is to prosper," while highlighting communication barriers with the younger generation and the influential role of media on society. Minister of Culture and Information Abdul Aziz Al-Khojah also discussed how the

media can promote a culture of dialogue. He raised the possibility of developing a special TV channel which would promote national dialogue, to help encourage healthy and vigorous social debate on questions of tolerance. He continued by saying new media such as Facebook, blogs, internet radio, television and digital literature have signaled "the end of one voice, one opinion and one color."

¶4. (U) Noura Al-Fayez, Deputy Minister of Girls' Education, expressed her belief that although diversity is part of human nature, dialogue has the ability to bridge differing points of view. Addressing a session on "Integrated Roles of the Ministry of Education (MOE) and Universities in Promoting Dialogue," Al-Fayez indicated the MOE's strong support for national dialogue had been expressed in a new five-year collaboration agreement between the KACND and the MOE.

¶5. (SBU) Sheikh Saleh Al-Asheikh, Minister of Islamic Affairs (MOIA) stressed the importance of mosques in promoting dialogue, in particular the crucial role of imams and sermon leaders (or khateeb). He pointed to training and educational programs available to all clerics to equip them with the necessary knowledge and tools to promote dialogue and tolerance while curbing extremism (Note: MOIA began a program in 2003 to monitor imams and khateeb for extreme and intolerant language. End Note). Other speakers echoing similar themes included Prince Faisal bin Abdullah, Minister of Education, Abdullah Al-Asheikh, Chairman of the Shoura Council, and Princess Al-Jawharah Bint Fahd Al Saud, President of the Princess Noura Bint Abdul Rahman University for women.

¶6. (U) In a contemporaneous interview with Okaz newspaper, Dr. Azzam Shuweir, Chairman of the Committee for Evaluating Imams and Sermon Leaders in the MOIA announced that a number of clerics have been terminated for reasons including provocative language, extremist ideas, poor health and negligence of mosques (Note: MOIA claims that since 2003, over 3,200 clerics have been dismissed. End Note). However, Dr. Shuweir asserted that over 90% of imams and khateeb adhere to MOIA rules and very few commit mistakes/violations that lead to dismissal. He highlighted the tight controls in place to monitor mosques and clerics including intensive (and often surprise) visits by members of his committee and review of Friday sermons and training courses. He noted, however, that removing sermon leaders was not easy as a number of procedures and approvals are needed.

¶7. (U) In a separate but related step, Saudi authorities have publicly floated the idea of establishing a hot line for citizens to report any clerics spreading extremist messages or using intolerant language in their mosques.

TARGETING THE YOUTH

¶8. (U) The King recently launched a new program at the KACND called the "Safeer" (Arabic for Ambassador) program which aims to promote dialogue between "young" foreigners and Saudis with an emphasis on students. This is the first time a national dialogue program has included Saudis and foreigners. Thus far, Japanese, British and Indian students have participated in dialogue sessions with their Saudi counterparts. The sessions mainly focus on cultural issues such as the latest movies and music. A contact from the Japanese Embassy active with the KACND commented that the program is "not mature" and still in its "infancy," but hopes future sessions might develop into deeper discussions that focus on politics, religion and education and will include adults as well.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE INITIATIVE SIMULTANEOUSLY PUSHED

¶9. (U) The national dialogue forum began two days after a six-member Saudi delegation headed by Shoura Chairman

Al-Asheikh attended a July 1-2 International Inter-Religious Forum in Astana, Kazakhstan. Over 600 delegates representing various faiths, countries and international organizations attended. In his statement to the Forum, Al-Sheikh stressed the importance of dialogue contributing to increased and more effective cooperation and co-existence of countries. Al-Asheikh also issued a press statement highlighting the significance of the interfaith dialogue conferences patronized by King Abdullah in Mecca, Madrid, and New York, stating, "the Saudi leadership is keen on effective cooperation in all constructive efforts in this respect" (Reftel).

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) The mix of high-level government and religious officials speaking at the 3-day cultural dialogue forum highlights the continued efforts by the King and the KACND to impress the concepts of tolerance and dialogue on Saudi public consciousness. The SAG may see the younger generation as the best starting point in generating dialogue and building bridges between Saudis and foreigners. The Astana event provided an opportunity for the Saudis to keep attention focused on the King's Interfaith Dialogue Initiative. The discourse envisioned by the national dialogue has a different focus than that of the IDI, but the message of tolerance is the same, and the two processes remain complementary parts of the King's effort to defeat extremism thinking at home and anti-Islamic thinking abroad.

ERDMAN